

Two U.S. congressmen – one a Republican, the other a Democrat – are calling for a congressional investigation of the federal government's wildlife damage control program.

Citing a recent series of articles in The Bee, Reps. **John Campbell**, R-Irvine, and Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., say they plan to ask Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, to conduct a hearing on the federal Wildlife Services program, which specializes in killing animals deemed to be a threat to agriculture, the public and the environment.

"We have an agency that appears to be wasting federal dollars and actually causing harm while doing it, but yet perhaps covering up what they are doing and why. That's something Congress should investigate," Campbell said.

Wildlife Services officials declined to comment. "We will not speculate on this," agency media coordinator Lyndsay Cole said in an email.

"They are incredibly secretive and obviously are not willing to change and have thus far been successfully protected," said DeFazio, who, along with **Campbell**, introduced a bill in March to ban Wildlife Services' use of the poisons sodium cyanide and Compound 1080 for predator control.

The Bee series, which began April 29, found the agency targets wildlife in ways that have accidentally killed thousands of non-offending animals, including family pets and federally protected golden eagles. It also found its blanket killing of predators is stirring concern among scientists about unintended ecological consequences, and its lethal force on behalf of ranchers and other "cooperators" is generally carried out with little or no public notice.

"I learned a number of things that I didn't know, even though I am obviously already involved with this topic," said Campbell.

Peter Orwick, executive director of the American Sheep Industry Association, reacted differently. "I was just very, very disappointed," he said. "It's just rolling out the animal rights agenda and all their unfounded attacks on the agency."

"It's the right time to have the debate," said Carter Niemeyer, former Wildlife Services district supervisor, who was quoted in the series. "It seems as good a time as ever to talk it out and see if this is where the public thinks we should be – and where the Congress thinks we should be."

Orwick defended federal predator control.

"We are talking about our livelihood," he said. "We are talking about the animals we raise, that we take a lot of pride in. When you have the public's wildlife – whether it's wolves or coyotes or bears – tearing apart the animals you spend every day with, it is a passionate issue."

Ranchers, he added, should not be expected to resolve such conflicts on their own. "Shouldn't they, in return for providing tens of millions of acres of habitat for the public's wildlife, be able to ask for just a small share of expertise from county, state and federal government to help with these conflicts when they arise? That's the bottom line."

Niemeyer said many ranchers already benefit from low-cost federal grazing fees on public lands. And predators, he added, should be strategically removed, not trapped, snared, poisoned and gunned down from the air in ways he said are often excessive, inhumane, indiscriminate and expensive.

"Why in the world should you and I pay for the federal government to fly around in helicopters for a handful of sheep men in this country, blasting coyotes year around," Niemeyer said. "Most of those coyotes have never been involved in (livestock) depredations. ..."

"I think there are many roles (Wildlife Services) can play," Niemeyer added. "Corrective control is one thing. But to go out and do pre-emptive killing of large predators, coyotes on up, just seems to be an outmoded method of dealing with problems."

DeFazio said: "Ranchers have every right to kill a predator which is preying on their livestock. That's not a question here.

"The federal government does have an obligation to protect the safety of the flying public and to protect people against predators that have become a threat. There is no discussion or argument about that.

"It's these indiscriminate practices that are ineffective and the waste of money to subsidize private undertakings that is in question."

Reform efforts will face stiff resistance. "The government revolves around agriculture and the agriculture lobby," said Niemeyer. "They absolutely call the shots. It's bizarre, the power they carry."

Another issue for DeFazio and **Campbell**: transparency.

"Why won't they let anyone go with them to see what they are doing? Why is there such a shroud of secrecy?" said Campbell. "Whose interests are they serving? That is the sort of thing we need to find out."